The Missing Peace

A gender brief on the current escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorny-Karabakh

By: The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
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Introduction

The public discourse around the current escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorny-Karabakh is largely focused on male centric politics and military analysis. The predominant image and voice in multimedia channels is that of male experts and male politicians, nationally, regionally and indeed internationally. Yet again, women's expertise, priorities, and needs are made invisible, and the human security of the populations at large is treated as a secondary concern to ending the military offensive, as if one can happen without the other. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation puts forward this gender brief on the escalation with the aim of keeping women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders' priorities and roles in focus. This brief builds on Kvinna till Kvinna's long presence in the region as well as updates and reports from its partner organisations, and women human rights defenders in the region. To this end, Kvinna till Kvinna acknowledges the strength and resilience of the WHRDs and women peacebuilders who have been personally, emotionally, and physically affected by this crisis, fleeing their homes and offices, and yet who continue to work on the ground to support rights holders.

Limited literature is available in English, (authored by international women's organisations or feminist academics) documenting women's experience and perspectives since the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorny-Karabakh reached a ceasefire in 1994.

The literature emphasises the role of international donors in undermining women's efforts to participate in the formal peace process and broader peacebuilding efforts. These concerns begin with the 'invisibility' of the region to donors, with corresponding drastic declines in funding especially for women's rights work[2]. The literature also refers to approaches of

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[1] Authors' note, the literature review has been prepared for Kvinna till Kvinna for an earlier study this year by the consultant Bela Kapur.
[2] Global Fund 2016

international actors which intentionally avoid supporting explicit peace-making activities in order not to provoke the conflict parties[3]. Walsh argues that overcoming the 'masculinised structures of the OSCE Minsk Group' in which traditional diplomacy - 'in other words elitist, opaque and state-centric' - has failed to yield security, requires both political will to include women's groups 'as a priority and not a side show' and a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical aspects of women's participation in peace processes which the major actors appear happy to leave off the agenda for now[4]. Indeed, it is suggested that leading by example and appointing women to senior positions within the Minsk Group would be an important step forward, providing women from the context with other women they could identify with and more generally boosting 'democratic values'[5].

In January 2019, the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers agreed on the necessity of 'preparing their populations for peace'. The statement, despite some dissatisfaction with portraying the populations as a passive object of policy making, was welcomed with its implicit affirmation of inclusivity[6]. In July 2020, as both nations were battling Covid-19, the first major escalation took place along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan but was contained within a few days. The direct trigger of the escalation remains unknown, however, with loss of faith in the decades-long peace process, territorial victory narratives regain popularity.

The current escalation is larger in nature of the offence and use of weaponry, with no signs from the conflict parties of willingness to contain the military offensive or respond to the appeals for a cease fire and a return to the negotiations table. Women activists, who are supporting and trying to promote peace, feel betrayed by the political leadership giving up their commitments on preparing populations for peace earlier in 2019.

The escalation can have a regional spill over, signs of inter-ethnic tensions are emerging in Georgia. During the July escalation, tensions amongst diaspora groups were also evident. The Turkish involvement has a direct spill over effect on the Turkish/Armenian conflict and grievances. With Turkey allegedly deploying Syrian mercenaries to the front lines supporting Azerbaijan, Ukraine officially announcing it's ready to support Azerbaijan

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[3] Kvinna till Kvinna, Equal Power Lasting Peace, 2012.
http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org/resource/equal-power-lasting-peace-2012/
[4] Sinead Walsh, Gender Inclusive Approaches to Peace, 2014
https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/nagornokarabakh-gender-inclusive-approach-to-peace/
[5] Kvinna till Kvinna, Equal Power Lasting Peace, 2012.
[6] Conciliation Resources, Preparing Populations for Peace, 2019 https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Preparing_populations_for_peace.pdf

with military equipment, and Assad supporting Armenia, Russia and Georgia have respectively called the parties to the negotiations table.

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and rights groups in Turkey, Russia, and Georgia can mobilise pressure on their governments to support a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and the role of regional women peace and mediation networks, groups, and individuals to be activated. Several different activist groups in the region, including women's rights, youth, and peacebuilding actors have launched appeals to end hostilities and stand with the people. This can be vital in maintaining trust and establishing dialogue corridors for WHRDs and peacebuilders regionally with the support of the EU and other international actors. When and if negotiations resume, women's participation is imperative for this process to yield different results. As an Armenian WHRD has eloquently put it "If women are not included, the peace process will look the same as it has for the past 30 years – broken."[7]

General mode pre-escalation

Negative peace

The overwhelming impression gained through a review of the literature is that the status quo not only serves the interests of elite groups[8], International Alert contends that it makes the peacebuilding agenda irrelevant at the top levels[9], through preserving negative peace[10]. 'Any abrupt changes in the status quo, even if generally favourable for society, could bring a loss in the political and socio-economic standing of these elites'[11].

Reflecting on the efforts and constraints of OSCE mediation in 2005, Jakoby's call[12] for a 'completely new, holistic style of politics' wherein the OSCE works with the Armenian and Azerbaijani political leaders to develop an 'integrated multi-track approach' whereby track one diplomacy is complemented by track two, and track three is undertaken by others, remains relevant[13]. De Waal[14] further suggests that the OSCE support

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[7] Kapur, B and Saleh, O. A Right Not A Gift, 2020 https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/A-Right-Not-A-Gift.pdf

[8]Ghaplanyan, I. Empowering and Engaging Civil Society in Conflict Resolution 2010, Vol. 15 Issue 1, p81-106

[9] International Alert, Advancing the Prospects for Peace, 2013. https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Caucasus_NagornyKarabakh_CivilPeacebuilding20Years_EN_2013.pdf

[10] International Alert, Envisioning Peace, 2018. https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Caucasus_EnvisioningPeace_EN_2018.pdf

[11] International Alert, Advancing Prospects for Peace, 2013.

[12] Jakoby, V, The Role of the OCSE, Conciliation Resources 2005. https://www.c-r.org/accord/nagorny-karabakh/role-osce-assessment-international-mediation-efforts

[13] Ghaplanyan, I. Empowering and Engaging Civil Society in Conflict Resolution 2010

[14] de Waal, T. 2010 'Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process', Survival, 52, 4.

parallel initiatives, noting that mediators' greater willingness to interact with and support civil society initiatives is a prerequisite for society's 'buying in' to a peace process and being ready for compromise.

For over two decades, peace talks have been conducted behind closed doors, with little effort to communicate their substance to the public, or to include the views of various constituencies affected by conflict and violence.[15] Women peacebuilders have tried to collect bits and pieces from the media to discuss with the communities most affected by conflict, whose voice to date seems to be muffled by the bullets. This has also created a sense of powerlessness to bring about peace when it is viewed as a male sphere exercise. In Kvinna till Kvinna's report *Listen to Her*[16], women in this context largely understand peace as being distanced from themselves and their daily lives. In fact, most women Kvinna till Kvinna has spoken with, see themselves as being outside the peace processes, which they understood as a task for the male elite.

Shrinking/Asymmetric civic space in Armenia, Azerbaijan and the disputed territories

The shift in politics and the opening of the civic space by the state in Armenia after the Velvet revolution was largely welcomed by the civil society. However, ultra-nationalist anti-gender groups were on the rise, with non-state actors targeting women's rights groups and activists with direct violence, discrediting women human rights defenders as a threat to family values and for being "agents" of the "enemy". While in Azerbaijan, the state-introduced policies had an impact of further shrinking the civic space for WHRDs and peacebuilders, by requiring permission from the Ministry of Justice for any activity or project proposal, and then controlling and applying bank freezes and further constraints on receiving foreign funds. WHRDs and civil society actors also reported defamation of the civil society by the state as "corrupt" or working "against the nation", if CSOs criticised the authorities. Civil society actors in Nagorny-Karabakh find themselves mostly forced to work with limited or no resources and/or under the radar.

This shrinking civic space has resulted in silencing the courageous and creative voices for peaceful victorious narratives that surpass the territorial deadlock, some of which simply call for putting the rights and priorities of the people most affected by conflict at the centre. The current escalation is

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[15] Twum, J et al, Listen To Her, Kvinna till Kvinna 2019. https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Listen-to-Her---Gendered-Effects-of-the-Conflict-over-Nagorno-Karabakh-and-Womens-Priorities-for-Peace.pdf
[16] Ibid

arguably giving theatre to the militarisation of women, and constructing their image in military outfits or volunteering for the military effort, resulted in a large disappointment by peace activists from all sides, particularly due the alleged participation of high-ranking female figures, who were previously regarded as voices of peace, in a military training camp[17] in Nagorny-Karabakh, shortly after the July clashes, and alleged mobilisation of women to join the army in Azerbaijan in the current escalation.

The asymmetry in the civic space and trust in authorities between Armenia and Azerbaijan also poses challenges to peacebuilding work in terms of access to resources, the safety and security of peacebuilders, and (un)accepted narratives of peacebuilding. Arguably, with the Armenian government still enjoying wide acceptance and approval of the civil society, there is a risk of the state steering what is acceptable or unacceptable peacebuilding work in such a way that would create schisms within the Armenian civil society scene. Whereas in Azerbaijan, WHRDs and peacebuilders engage in high-risk peacebuilding work, which, in the best of cases, is frowned upon by the government. If anything, this calls for increased support and focus on peacebuilding work within and across the two nations (for those actors who are ready and willing to engage) to preserve the fragile trust built over years of dialogue and meetings between practitioners, now further threatened by increased militarisation and conflict escalation.

Propaganda and Fake News

In a state of negative peace, the propaganda machinery is active, especially with very limited opportunities to meet across the conflict divide. An image of an "other" who is different, less peaceful, unwilling to compromise, and "unmanly" is constructed and propagated. Now, with casualties on all sides, the propaganda and fake news make it more difficult to contain this aspect of the escalation, the impact of which continues to resonate even after cessation of hostilities between the conflict parties.

Propagating gendered norms of heroism have a far-reaching impact on women. Women are portrayed as the "mothers of the nation", and "the honour of the nation", their care and support role to the military machinery is celebrated and expected. Often, after the war is over, the same women find themselves forgotten and trapped in the traditional expectations of women to be selfless, demand no compensation for their losses, put up with

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[17] OC Media, 2020 https://oc-media.org/pashinyans-wife-brandishes-ak-47-in-women-for-peace-event-photos/

returned "warriors'" war trauma and sometimes abuse and violence, because the latter are the "heroes" of the nation

The propaganda machinery in light of the asymmetric trust in the state also makes it more difficult for civil society actors, including Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), WHRDs and women peacebuilders, to filter through the influx of (fake) news and information and translate this amongst themselves and to their constituencies. What adds to this challenge is the limited and controlled access to information, which is exacerbated by large restrictions of access to the internet in Azerbaijan.

The impact of Covid-19 on militarisation

Covid-19 has impacted women and women's livelihood in more ways than research has managed to capture to date, not least in contexts of fragility. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the contested territory of Nagorny-Karabakh are, like the rest of the world, impacted by the Covid-19 health crisis, but its economic ramifications are more severe on the border regions and the two nations at large. The current military escalation is proceeding in a context of medical shortages, where shelters are not prepared or in poor shape, and experiencing shortages in basic humanitarian needs, particularly women's humanitarian needs which are once again overlooked. It can be argued that the economic blow in an atmosphere of escalation created a financial incentive to join the military and revive the territorial gain narrative over the "preparing populations for peace" narrative. The economic impact of Covid-19 may have also contributed to:

- Further militarisation of income resourcing;
- An influx of foreign fighters instrumentalised by the regional powers with vested interest in the conflict;
- Diaspora remittances feeding the war economy and raising funds for the fight
- The loss of women's informal businesses and their ability to secure basic needs like food and shelter;
- The physical and psychological vulnerability of women caregivers for families and Covid-19 patients where the possibilities to quarantine in a shelter are not only limited but pose a health hazard to all those in shelter;
- The vulnerability of the elderly as another group either heading households who lost their primary caregivers or added to the women-headed households' care burden. The elderly suffering shortages in

access to medication and challenges in access to unprepared shelters with no infrastructure for their mobility;

- Women's loss of income and financial independence, coupled with increased domestic and caregiving duties (unpaid care work), which, especially in the case of WHRDs, has precluded or limited them from fully engaging in peace work, as survival needs are pressing;
- An increase in domestic violence and gender-based violence with the financial burden resulting from the health crisis and its implications on livelihoods and home-schooling, in addition to the stress of the military escalation, and increased levels of violence in the society at large.

What are the women doing here & now?

Reliving the trauma is what most Kvinna till Kvinna's partners in the region are reporting on the current escalation, but this time with health crisis added to the mix. Shortages in the humanitarian needs of women, particularly in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), are reported when it comes to shelter, food and dignity kits. Often, women prioritise the needs of the family over their own and find themselves at the frontlines of service delivery and care jobs carrying the economic and emotional burden.

Women in service delivery as a peacebuilding resource

Women obviously have a function across the spectra of constructive and destructive roles. There are examples of women enticing war narratives, dressed in military outfits and mobilising for the state's armed action, as well as volunteering in it. The focus here will be on WHRDs and women peacebuilders on the frontline of response and, as well as the relevance of service delivery to peacebuilding.

We can see 5 distinct roles WHRDs and peacebuilders are playing at this stage:

1. Countering propaganda and rumours using their long-invested networks and trust, by cross checking information about certain incidents, remaining present in "virtual" groups, and checking on the safety and wellbeing of each other;
2. Preparing for "home grown" analysis;
3. Making something out of nothing: women headed households are faced with the impact of Covid-19 and war on their access to food

and other necessities in a context where making ends meet was already a challenge;
4. Shelter coordination and gender-responsive service delivery;
5. Thinking and preparing for "when the war is over" by planning psycho-social and legal support for the most affected

Over its long-term engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kvinna till Kvinna has witnessed how safe spaces have given women the opportunity to transition from survival mode to peacebuilding mode and also to engage in politics as elected representatives. The importance to first acknowledge the basic needs of women, providing new underwear or sanitary towels, for instance, was seen as supporting their dignity and empowering them to regain agency and act. In this context, women have found themselves filling a large vacuum in service delivery and shelter management during a health crisis. In Azerbaijan, women are volunteering and using their own contacts and access to restricted bordering communities to respond to *ad hoc* needs. While in in Armenia women are mobilising resources, volunteering and coordinating efforts with the Ministry of Social Affairs in responding to the immediate needs of women and children in shelters.

Many of shelters that women are supporting and coordinating are neither rehabilitated nor built for this purpose (schools, empty state buildings, abandoned houses, etc.). WHRDs and peacebuilders are organising the support work in the hardly reachable or restrictive places. Many of them transforming their offices into aid collection centres -- an experience that should be remembered and valued when negotiations resume.

Service delivery can have a severe impact on peacebuilding, as it takes place at some of the most vulnerable moments. The way the aid is delivered can influence inter-community trust, legitimacy of aid actors, and social cohesion at large.

Women, Peace, and Security implications

Armenia adopted its first National Action Plan (NAP) on the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2019, while the draft for it in Azerbaijan remains under study with the Parliament. The *de facto* authorities in Nagorny-Karabakh find themselves less inclined to look into the meaning or commitments of UNSCR 1325 for the context, a feeling perhaps shared by WHRDs and women's rights organisations who, as one activist said: "I feel the inaction of 1325 on my skin". The commitment of authorities to WPS across the region is largely viewed as window dressing with no bearing for women during the current escalation. However, WHRDs

and peacebuilders have found ways of translating the WPS agenda into concrete action.

In Armenia UNSCR 1325 has been used by WHRDs and peacebuilders to:

a. **Build trust amongst Azerbaijani and Armenian women** – to gain support for unpopular activities e.g. to support cross-context dialogues, particularly amongst young women;
b. Identify women's priorities and challenges in conflict;
c. **Raise awareness among women and local authorities** on Women, Peace, and Security needs assessment to develop a NAP (2017/2018)
d. Raise awareness among children/students – teach WPS in schools to spread the culture of peace among youth, university students – albeit not widespread or supported officially;
e. Set up a **1325 monitoring group** (comprising 8 CSOs) in Armenia to monitor UNSCR 1325 after having received training (2013);
f. Train journalists on WPS and gender-sensitive reporting;
g. **Advocate** vis-à-vis the EU and other international stakeholders;

Even before its adoption, WHRDs in Armenia were concerned about reports from their Ukrainian counterpart on the militarisation of the UNSCR 1325 NAP in Ukraine by allocating more resources to the police and military in the name of resourcing the 1325 NAP, while the participation provisions in peace and political processes were perceived to be neglected. This concern is more pressing with the military escalation and return to victorious war narratives, and a potential of hijacking the agenda to increase military resourcing and limit the participation discussion to the military sphere.

In Azerbaijan, the UNSCR 1325 NAP draft pushed for by the WROs, WHRDs, and a **women's 1325 coalition** with 22 women from the private and public sectors is still under consideration. WHRDs perceive the government tries to control and stall the 1325 NAP process because the authorities see the draft plan as a threat from the grassroots. This is seen by the civil society as a sign of the government's lack of buy in for the 1325 NAP. UNSCR 1325 is seen by WHRDs in Azerbaijan as:

a. A tool and a mechanism to promote women's participation at different levels – grassroots and high level. It **helps to build structure and steps** and formulate issues/problems;

b. A recognition force to **women as drivers of processes**, in the face of the notion that "Peace is seen to be very difficult – and not a women's issue";

c. **A framework for monitoring,** e.g. 2014 – a **1325 monitoring report** was prepared for the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders;

d. **Language and space for exposure to women from other sides** e.g. through EU4Peace, *Women's Pathways to Peace* and similar initiatives

In Nagorny-Karabakh, WHRDs and peacebuilders are finding novel ways of voicing their priorities, concerns, and contributions, through contributing to shadow reports and joining efforts with likeminded actors in the region, to name a few examples. However, the general sense about UNSCR 1325 is that the resolution is largely not applicable to women in contested territories. Women in this context have not seen the impact of the resolution on their *de facto* authorities or the governments of the two conflicting nations. Twenty years since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 is high time for creating a mechanism to translate the resolution into action in the context of Nagorny-Karabakh. Women in this context find themselves unable to participate and influence the outcome of a peace process that will have direct impact on their lives. Their protection needs are violated by the conflict parties, and post-escalation, they are the group to first be forgotten due to a myriad of challenges, including restrictions on channelling funds to the civil society in this context.

Covid-19 implications for WPS in the region

Women are less protected economically, paid less and work more in the informal sector. When women begin to sacrifice income and focus on addressing the needs of their community and households, the autonomy of women is jeopardised. The global economic crisis expected to follow the pandemic may also severely hit the already underfunded women's rights movement in the region. Accordingly, the health crisis exposes the existing socio-economic gender inequalities. Lack of employment opportunities and economic hardships were already general challenges, especially severe for IDP women and those living in bordering communities. In the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Nagorny-Karabakh contexts, the socio-economic effects of war are directly visible in communities affected by the conflict; here, everyday subsistence is often the top priority. Many people are indebted, and migration is often resorted to when there are no jobs to be found locally.

The ongoing escalation will add on the destroyed infrastructure and deepen poverty.

The lack of power and resources is a major hindering factor for women's opportunities to live safe and fulfilled lives and points to the need for interventions that reduce dependency and promote greater economic independence and empowerment (on the levels of norms, institutions, and women's agency) as an enabler of women's democratic and peacebuilding power. There has not been more urgency to include explicit provisions on women's economic leadership, rights, and participation than today.

What can be done now?

Immediate needs and priorities for WHRDs and women peacebuilders
- An emergency fund for WHRDs and women peacebuilders;
- Access to internet and secure digital platforms;
- Access to affected territories, regions along the Line of Contact, Nagorny-Karabakh and bordering territories;
- Physical and/or psychological support to ensure security for WHRDs and women peacebuilders directly working with the bordering communities and affected areas;
- Cover of logistics, accommodation and/or transportation costs for women who jointly work to provide humanitarian aid and other types of support to displaced women, elderly and children;
- Secure and safe spaces for communication;
- Tools to navigate fake news and propaganda;
- Professional counselling for women and for children housed in shelters and directly affected by the conflict. Visits of trusted psychologists or doctors to the bordering communities and established shelters;
- Emotional support in joint groups.

Medium term priorities
- Recognition and utilisation of women's humanitarian leadership by all duty bearers;
- Women's inclusion and promotion of women's economic leadership and rights in post-conflict/post-Covid-19 economic recovery;
- Recognition of women peacebuilders' narratives as representative of their constituencies, often most affected by conflict, as an integral part to the general mode to actively help transform the victorious war narratives;

- Supporting the development of gender responsive early warning systems (GREWS) on the ground in order to timely and effectively address any future tensions or escalations;
- Activation of the role of the Women Task Force for Peace, and other regional women peace and mediation networks as a proactive measure to contain regional spill over and to serve as a conduit for gender-specific needs and priorities for the official processes, as well as cross-context trust (re)building;
- Resourcing of the women's peace movements across the region and creating a regional women thematic peacebuilding taskforce with technical expertise (for example, in areas such as ceasefire monitoring, gender-responsive early warning, analysis, etc);
- Establish a regular consultation mechanism between the OSCE Minsk Group, the office of the EU Special Representative (EUSR), national stakeholders and WHRDs and women peacebuilders for inclusion of women's priorities into the political and peacebuilding agenda;
- Support to the direct and meaningful participation of WHRDs and women peacebuilders in the official peace processes.